

Reading Critically & Rhetorically

Reading well at the graduate level is a process of ensuring efficiency, an understanding of the bigger picture, and close attention to detail. Reading is useful for learning content, deepening understanding of the scholarly conversations in a field, developing one's ability as a critical thinker and writer, and often setting up one's own work. Both the reader's and the writer's purposes are essential as is the expected final use of the reading. This handout provides a set of steps to approach and engage with a text, some recommendations for how to organize a collection of sources, and a set of questions to facilitate critical and rhetorical reading.

In most cases, do not jump right in and begin reading from the top. Instead, follow these steps:

1. Skim the text and read through the title, headings, and any other sections. How is the text organized and what is the progression of ideas?
2. Plug the source into Google Scholar's metrics website to get an idea of how often it is cited and by whom. This can often give you a sense of where it fits in a field's conversation and debates. <https://scholar.google.com/intl/en/scholar/metrics.html>
3. Read the abstract if there is one. If it is a chapter in a collection, go back to introductory chapter and see if there is information about what this chapter is about and why.
4. Consider your purpose for reading the text. Is there something you should be focusing on more than other parts?
5. As you read, annotate and underline the text. Take notes in the margin that ask important questions and give you signposts for when you return to the text. Your purpose for reading it should guide this.
6. Take notes on a separate document and write reflective/reactive ideas about the important sections. Analyze the strength of the major claims of the reading.
7. Be sure to mark or take notes on the main points of the text or write a short summary about it.
8. Take time to synthesize and review notes shortly after reading the text to increase understanding as well as the emergence of new, creative ideas.

If you are reading the source to use in a paper, literature review, or long project, consider developing an ongoing collection of sources by creating an annotated bibliography and/or a source matrix. The former is an alphabetized list of sources with a citation, a summary, and key other information on each text depending on your purpose. See our Annotated Bibliography handout for more information on this. A source matrix utilizes a table to organize sources around key themes. Key words are utilized to easy rearrange sources based on the different themes. They can be used to house a lot of notes on each source or not. See our Source Matrix handout for more information.

Here are a set of questions to help guide critical reading.¹ These go a long way to looking at both important contextual and content-based elements of the text:

1. Who is the audience the author is writing for? What is the purpose of the article?
2. What is the research question/hypothesis/thesis the author is addressing? Is it relevant, interesting, exciting?
3. What conclusions are drawn from the research?
4. What evidence was collected, and was it good? Should other evidence have been included? Does the evidence support the conclusion well enough?
5. Do the author's conclusions follow from the evidence?
6. What are the main assumptions underlying the text?
7. If there are figures or tables, are they clear?
8. Does the article make an original contribution to the field?

¹ Adapted from Swales, John M, and Christine B Feak. 2012. *Academic Writing for Graduate Students : Essential Tasks and Skills*. 3rd ed. Michigan Series in English for Academic & Professional Purposes. Ann Arbor Michigan: University of Michigan Press.